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The Education Trust—Midwest

Testimony on House Bill 5707 – September 6, 2018

Thank you for the opportunity to speak this morning about education evaluations in Michigan. I am Brian Gutman, the Director of External Relations at The Education Trust-Midwest. We are a data-driven, education research, information and advocacy organization committed to improving the quality of public education in Michigan and closing our troubling gaps in achievement and opportunity.

As an equity-focused organization, we are particularly focused on the quality of classroom instruction and how educators are supported to improve their practice. This is because the quality of classroom instruction is well recognized as the most significant in-school factor for improving student outcomes. We know that when provided with exceptional educators year after year, struggling students can catch up and succeed. And we know that when students do not have access to quality instruction, students learn less and can quickly fall behind.

Simply put, if education policy is about putting students first – which it certainly ought to be – then continuously improving the quality of classroom instruction must be an utmost priority.

That is why Public Act 173 of 2015 was such an important moment for Michigan public education. After years of asking teachers to do and achieve more, without the feedback and support to help them improve, Michigan was turning a corner when it came to supporting educators and their efforts in the classroom. This bipartisan effort resulted from the leadership of Senator Phil Pavolv, Rep. Adam Zemke, Senator Margaret O'Brien, former representatives Lisa Lyons and Amanda Price and broad support from the education community.

As significant as this law is for Michigan, Ed Trust-Midwest agrees that it is not perfect. Unfortunately, House Bill 5707 will amplify flaws in the law and do nothing to enhance the law's goal of improving the quality of teaching and learning in Michigan classrooms. The Education Trust-Midwest opposes HB 5707 and urges members of the committee to oppose it as well.

In our prior efforts to improve educator evaluations, feedback and support, Ed Trust-Midwest looked closely at research and the experience of states leading in this area:

- We found that the best systems are rooted in student growth data, so that educators are measured as objectively as possible on the impact that they have on student learning during the course of the school year;
- We found that educators were most empowered to improve when evaluations provided actionable feedback and were connected to systems of professional support– a reason why using both student growth data and multiple classroom observations is so important;
- And we found that when done well, teachers not only trusted that the evaluation systems in place were fair to them and their students, but agreed that evaluation systems actually helped them improve their classroom practice. For example, the state of Tennessee is among the nation's fastest improving states for key student learning indicators. Leaders there credit its high-impact statewide system of educator support and evaluation as arguably the highest-impact strategy

Use of Evaluations

Educator evaluations are about improving student outcomes by improving classroom instruction through a systemic approach. This only happens when evaluations provide robust quantitative and qualitative feedback – growth data and observation information – and are connected to professional development and support.

Many districts in Michigan have a long way to go to make this happen. When educators experience the evaluation side only – without the objective feedback and appropriate professional support to act on that evaluation –, of course they may be critical of the whole process.

Best practice is clear: teachers need multiple forms of feedback. Yet HB 5707 does not improve this balance. Instead, the bill prioritizes qualitative observation feedback well above everything else while diminishing the importance of quantitative student growth data. While observations provide important information about the input – teacher practice in the classroom, student growth data provides equally important information about the outcome – how much students are learning during the school year.

In Conclusion

Michigan has a long way to go to provide every student – especially students starting furthest behind – with the quality education that they need. There is no doubt that classroom educators are critical to the success of our students and our schools. While imperfect, Public Act 173 of 2015 makes important progress and provides local schools and the state with a major opportunity to better support Michigan teachers in their efforts to support all students. We should be making the most of that opportunity, as leading states such as Tennessee have done. Unfortunately, HB 5707 will dampen our recent progress. We urge the committee to reject this legislation. And we thank the committee for allowing us to share this testimony on such an important topic to Michigan students, families and other stakeholders.